

How to host an all-candidates meeting

Churches and faith-based organizations can organize and hold all-candidates meetings during election campaigns. These non-partisan events can be seen as a gift to the broader community and an opportunity for all candidates in the riding to share their views and answer questions from the audience.

All-candidates meetings provide helpful information to church members and the local community about where their local candidates stand on issues of concern.

We suggest partnering with other churches to maximize attendance and candidate participation.

Five steps to hold an all-candidates meeting

It is best to start planning your all candidates meeting early in the campaign period. Check your area's public health guidelines to find out what pandemic restrictions are in place.

1. Choose a place, date and time for the meeting and invite the candidates to attend.

The Elections Canada website, elections.ca, will list all the candidates in the riding. You may want to consider holding the meeting online.

2. Plan the meeting format

- Choose a time limit for opening remarks from candidates (usually not more than 5 minutes) and the order the candidates will speak (alphabetical is a safe choice).
- Choose a time limit for the total question and answer period (such as 1 hour or 40 minutes) and a time limit for each question and answer (e.g., 30 seconds for each question, one minute for the answer).
- Choose the closing remarks order (usually the reverse order from opening remarks).
- Choose a time limit for closing remarks (usually not more than 3 minutes).

3. Select a moderator and a timekeeper

The meeting moderator introduces the candidates and moderates questions from the audience. The moderator also:

- Ensures each candidate has submitted a brief bio, and reads them during the introduction of the evening.
- Explains the guidelines and the schedule for the evening and ensures the rules of the meeting are followed.

- Remains neutral and does not get involved in questions or answers.
- Puts a stop to any personal attacks or inappropriate exchanges that might erupt.

The timekeeper monitors time and notifies the candidates and questioners of the time limits, often using an app on a tablet that can be clearly seen by all candidates (for example), or a stopwatch, gavel or bell. The timekeeper also notifies the candidates one minute (and perhaps again 30 seconds) before the end of the time limit for opening and closing remarks.

4. Invite the community and advertise ahead of time so people can plan to attend.

- People will need to hear about the event a number of times, with as much advance notice as possible, in order for it to be noted and remembered. Provide all relevant information, including the candidates' names, parties and websites.
- Post your event on local community event apps, Facebook, Twitter and other social media outlets, and other online news sources. Notify the local newspaper by a call, email or a press release and deliver flyers in the community in advance of the meeting.
- Ask the candidates and their teams to spread the word as well.
- Inform your congregation of the meeting through a bulletin insert or announcement. You could include some sample questions that might be used at the event to get people thinking more about the issues, and to build excitement for the event.

Planning tip: *Be sure to communicate with the candidates as you plan the meeting. Make sure they know the format of the event and whether or not they can bring material or signs for an information table.*

5. When the big day arrives

- Set up tables, chairs and microphones at the front of the auditorium (on a raised platform if available) for the candidates, with name and party signs that can be read from any seat. Provide water for the candidates. Seat the candidates in alphabetical order according to surname.
- If possible arrange two numbered floor microphones for the audience to use for asking their questions. Alternate the questions between microphones. If microphones are not available, arrange identified locations for questioners to wait in line.
- Set up one or more tables in the foyer for each candidate's literature.

Guidelines for the audience

The moderator should inform the audience of guidelines at the beginning of the meeting:

- This is not a debate but an information forum.
- Voice your agreement or disagreement with the candidate's response at the ballot box, not here.
- No personal attacks will be permitted.
- A timekeeper will be appointed to monitor and notify candidates and questioners of time limits; the timekeeper will notify candidates one minute before the end of the time limit for opening and closing remarks. The timekeeper can also monitor the length of time audience members spend asking lengthy questions.

Sample schedule for an all-candidates meeting

7:00 p.m. start

Welcome and opening prayer requesting God's blessing and direction on the evening by the pastor. Introduction of the moderator by the pastor.

Introduction of the candidates by the moderator from brief biographies provided by the candidates before the meeting. Moderator explains the guidelines and schedule for the evening (provided to candidates prior to the meeting).

Opening remarks by candidates (between 2 to 5 minutes each – this will depend on number of candidates, timeline for meeting and duration of question and answer time); presentations made in alphabetical order according to surname.

Moderator opens the question and answer period:

- Each questioner must be recognized and acknowledged by the moderator, state their name and then pose their one question, identifying the candidate from whom they wish to hear.
- The questioner must state the question within 30 seconds and the candidate(s) must answer within one minute (or less).
- The moderator must remain neutral and not get involved in the questions or answers, except to possibly reword the question for clarity.

You may wish to consider a question and answer period followed by a "lightning round" of "yes" or "no" questions. Provide each candidate with large coloured "yes" cards (e.g., green) and "no" cards (e.g., red). Have all candidates simultaneously respond to a series of five to ten yes or no questions by holding up the appropriate card.

8:45 p.m. closing remarks

Candidates' closing remarks (up to 3 minutes each) in reverse order to opening remarks.

Moderator will direct anyone who did not have opportunity to voice their question(s) to see the candidates following the meeting at their individual literature tables in the foyer.

9:00 p.m. meeting ends